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Home



Thursday, May 26, 2011

All Chewed Over By Machines

#[AWOBMOLG](#) Have been watching the first part of the latest Adam Curtis documentary "All Watched Over By Machines of Loving Grace". @socialtechno reckons "It's like a man writing a love letter to someone he doesn't love."

The documentary is named after a rather soppy 1950 poem by Richard Brautigan, and opens with Ayn Rand. Curtis would like us to believe that everyone in Silicon Valley was inspired and influenced by Ayn Rand (based on the fact that a few people named their children and companies after herself or her works) and he uses the life and works of Ayn Rand to frame a powerful but logically flawed dialectic about technological capitalism.

Thesis

"Ever since the 1970s, computer utopians in California believed that if human beings were linked by webs of computers, then together they could create their own kind of order. It was a cybernetic dream, which said that the feedback of information between all the individuals connected as nodes in the network would work to create a self-stabilizing system. The world would be stable, yet everyone would be heroic Randian beings completely free to follow their desires."

This conflates a diverse range of beliefs and theories that were circulating all around the world, certainly not just in California. Those developing these ideas were far more likely to have been inspired and influenced by Karl Marx than by Ayn Rand. (Marx wrote of a world in which "the free self-development of each would be the condition of the free self-development of all"). Or perhaps Paul Goodman or Marcuse or Sartre or Norman O Brown or Ivan Illich or any number of other postwar European and American intellectuals. Meanwhile, cybernetics was emerging from the work of mathematicians and systems thinkers - including Norbert Wiener, Ross Ashby, Jay Forrester and Stafford Beer - who posed a radical critique to the managerial philosophy of Taylorism and Fordism.

Curtis refers to this collection of ideas as "The Californian Ideology". According to [Wikipedia](#), this term was coined by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, who wrote an essay with this title in 1995 as a critique of West Coast cyber-libertarianism. The essay doesn't mention Ayn Rand, but it does mention some of the writers who appear in Curtis's film, including Stuart Brand, Kevin Kelly, Peter Schwartz and Alvin Toffler. By stringing together short clips from his

interviews with these and other worthies, Curtis creates the impression that their opinions can all be lumped together into a common belief system, which he can then attack in the next part of the film.

Antithesis

Meanwhile, one of the most influential followers of Ayn Rand was Alan Greenspan, for many years the Chairman of the US Federal Reserve. Along with other members of the financial elite, Greenspan persuaded President Clinton to abdicate control of the financial sector, and leave financial stability and prosperity to the markets. In some ways this new market libertarianism was a continuation of the economic monetarism that prevailed in the 1980s under Reagan and Thatcher. During the 1990s, however, people started to tell themselves a story in which the new technology somehow replaced the old economy (boom and bust) with a new economy based on unshakable stability, perpetual productivity growth and a transfer of power from governments to the people. This story (which we now know to have been wishful thinking) echoed some elements of the Californian ideology, but it was overlaid with all sorts of other political agendas.

Greenspan himself observed that there was a puzzling mismatch between corporate profits and genuine productivity growth. If the global economy had been a viable system in the cybernetic sense, designed or emerging according to the principles of Stafford Beer and others, this kind of information would be properly shared and interpreted, and would have had significant regulatory force.

Greenspan's original interpretation of this mismatch was that there was a worm in the apple of new market liberalism: he was soon persuaded to abandon this interpretation in favour of a much more optimistic one. As Curtis shows, using the IMF's intervention into Indonesia as an example, the financial elites leveraged the market system to protect their own interests, even when this ran counter to any notion of stability or general prosperity or natural justice. Ayn Rand would probably have called such behaviour "rational". Curtis gives us a lot of background about Rand's unbalanced sex life, in order to illustrate the mutually destructive nature of Rand's selfish notion of "rationality". He perhaps intended this section of the film as an allegory for the systemic side-effects of the Myth of the Machine.

Greenspan is portrayed in the film as an anti-hero, whose indecision and folly led an unsuspecting world (along with a compliant or distracted President Clinton) into disaster. Curtis also uses the Monica Lewinsky story, a tiny amount of familiar stock footage stretched by slow motion effects, to reinforce the train-crash element of the Clinton presidency. (Although it's difficult to see how Curtis can blame Californian hippies for all that. Might just as easily blame the Cavendish Laboratory.) But this is a fairly conventional version of recent history, which doesn't seem to tell us very much about our changing relationship with technology.

Synthesis

Curtis portrays Clinton as an important pivotal figure in this story, brought down by a series of tragic conflicts. Being as arrogant and selfish as Ayn Rand in his sexual behaviour - but being forced into concealment and deception by his political position. Adoring the old-style democratic politics (says Curtis), but being lured by the evil Greenspan-lago into the new anti-politics. (Clinton as the glamorous Othello, obviously, who remains handsome even when picking his teeth.)

There is a heroic way of narrating history that concentrates on leaders and their personal strengths and weaknesses. Curtis's previous film, *The Power of Nightmares*, told a fascinating

tale of the leaders of the American Right and the leaders of al Qaeda, and revealed intriguing links and parallels between Bush and Bin Laden.

There is also an "objective" way of narrating history, that downplays leadership and concentrates on the deeper system forces that shape events. George Orwell noted the tendency of Marxists to overuse words like "objectively", but surely nobody can doubt that political activity can sometimes have unanticipated or even counterproductive effects. Systems thinkers including Stafford Beer and Maturana remind us that complex sociotechnical systems may sometimes have a life of their own, preserving their essential characteristics regardless of the espoused intentions and best efforts of the people who are supposed to be in charge. (POSIWID was Beer's name for this effect.) Economists appeal to the "invisible hand", which supposedly creates beneficial outcomes without conscious planning or top-down governance. (By the way, the extreme form of economic liberalism espoused by Greenspan was popular in the 19th century, so it's a bit misleading to credit Ayn Rand with inventing this idea.) And narratives about the power of The Machine tend to belong here.

I've got better things to do with my time than work out how Ayn Rand's version of "objectivism" attempts to reconcile the notion of personal heroism (while steering away from Nietzsche's version) with the notion of system forces (while steering away from Marx's version). But if Adam Curtis believes he can produce a historical account that personalizes how we are watched over by machines, without dealing with the problems introduced by an array of German intellectuals from Marx to Nietzsche, he may be as much a captive of the Ayn Rand camp as the people featured in his film. (See what I did there?)

Notes

Richard Brautigan, "[All Watched Over By Machines Of Loving Grace](#)" (via American Poems). Brautigan was briefly a poet-in-residence at CalTech, so he must have influenced loads of people in Silicon Valley mustn't he? Jarvis Cocker calls him "A Hemingway for Hippies" ([Guardian 17 September 2014](#)).

Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, [The Californian Ideology](#) (1995)

Terry Eagleton, [In Praise of Marx](#) (Chronicle Review, April 2011)

Kevin Kelly, [Out of Control](#) (1994)

Montserrat Tovar, [Pandora's Vox: On Community in Cyberspace](#) (1994)

Previews and reviews of "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace"

- [Adam Curtis](#) (especially comments by Leeravitz and leftnotliberal)
- [Chris Applegate](#) (24 May 2011)
- [Brainfisch](#) (26 May 2011)
- [Andrew Orlowski](#) (The Register 23 May 2011)
- [Ashwin Parameswaran](#) (24 May 2011)
- [Paul Rennie](#) (24 May 2011)
- [Alasdair Thompson](#) (Bright Green 26 May 2011) ([via OrgZone 25 May 2011](#))
- [Sam Wollaston](#) (Guardian 23 May 2011)
- [Saturday Review](#) (BBC Radio 4, 21 May 2011)
- [Wikipedia](#)

More on Ayn Rand

- Howard Gold, [Did Greenspan channel or betray Ayn Rand](#) (MarketWatch June 2010)
- Noah Kristula-Green, [Tea Party Embraces Ayn Rand](#) (FrumForum, July 2010) via [Jonathan Chait](#) (New Republic)
- Amity Shlaes, [Rand's Atlas Is Shrugging With a Growing Load](#) (Bloomberg July 2009)
- Vladimir Shlapentokh, [The Marxist and Bolshevik Roots of Ayn Rand's Philosophy](#) (Aug 2010)
- Jenny Turner, [As Astonishing as Elvis](#) (LRB Vol 27 No 23, 1 Dec 2005) with reply by [Chris Sciabarra](#) (6 Dec 2005)
- Slavoj Zizek, [The actuality of Ayn Rand](#) pdf, (Journal of Ayn Rand Studies Vol 3 No 2, Spring 2002)

More on Adam Curtis

- Brian Holmes, [NEOLIB GOES NEOCON: Adam Curtis, or Cultural Critique in the 21st Century](#) (June 2007)
- [Adam Curtis: Cognitive Deterrorization](#) (Politics of Knowledge, Feb 2008)
- [Adam Curtis Alarm Clock Films](#) (Diagonal Thoughts, March 2008)

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[Richard Veryard](#) at 12:09 am



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